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Rendering emotional coloring in literary translation

Olga Petrova[a], Maria Rodionova[b,]*

[a,b] *State Linguistics University of Nizhny Novgorod, Minin St, 31A, Nizhny Novgorod, 603155, Russia*

Abstract

The paper presents results of a comparative analysis of three translations of Dostoevsky's "The Idiot" undertaken for the purpose of revealing the ways in which emotional coloring of translations differ from that of the original text. The number of words denoting different emotions in the original and in translations is compared, as well as frequency of their occurrence in each of the texts. A difference in the way emotions are named in English and in Russian is shown. The role of words denoting different types of emotions in reproducing the emotional charge of a literary text in translation, the necessity to preserve the density of such words in the text and the balance of positive and negative emotion words are discussed. The authors come to the conclusion that the same pattern in which all the three translations deviate from the original is predetermined by the difference in the ways emotions are named in English and in Russian, as well as by different literary traditions.

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1. Introduction

Rendering the emotional coloring of a literary text is an uphill task for a translator. Apart from naming and describing emotions experienced by characters, the author expresses them obliquely through the dialogues, through the way the characters frame sentences, through the words they choose. Description of facial expression, voice and manner of characters also adds to the general emotional picture. All these things, however, are quite tangible and in the majority of cases can be quite adequately – if not always easily – translated. But does the sum total of these means exhaust the emotional substance of the text?

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +79056622446.
E-mail address: o.v.petrova.nn@gmail.com

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F. Dostoevsky's novels are known for their emotional impact on the readers. One cannot but feel their oppressive atmosphere of gloom and darkness. Literary critics have controversial opinions about their artistic value, some say it is more psychology than art, but the fact is that after reading several Dostoevsky's novels one after another people start feeling depressed, despondent and dispirited. And it is also evident that technically the effect is achieved through the language. Dostoevsky does not do it with mirrors, he does it with words. That is why it is interesting to see if the same effect can be achieved in translation.

It would seem that of all the means mentioned above the easiest is to translate direct names and descriptions of emotions: for every Russian word there must be a corresponding English word – the more so because human emotions (unlike their manifestations) are more or less universal. However, analysis of three translations of "The Idiot" (by Eva Martin in 1915, by Alan Myers in 1992 and by David McDuff in 2004) shows that it is not necessarily so. The paper aims at answering the question why the number of feeling words and the way they are used by different translators differ from the original text showing the same pattern in all the three translations, the hypothesis being that it depends on the language itself as well as on national literary traditions rather than on the translator's idyostyle.

2. Comparative analysis of feeling words used in the texts

The three translations differ in many ways. Each reflects accepted tendencies in literary translation of the time, as well as individual approach of a translator, their individual interpretation of the novel, and their own individual style. Eva Martin obviously felt free to abridge the novel by omitting whole paragraphs. Alan Myers adapts Dostoevsky's somewhat Dickensian style to the contemporary reader by simplifying it syntactically. David McDuff seeks to preserve all the formal features of the author's style. All the more interesting is the fact that in each of the three translations the number of words denoting emotions is considerably greater than in the original Russian text, while the number of their occurrences in the text is smaller.

2.1. The number of feeling words and their semantic structure

This seemingly strange correlation was revealed as a side result of a larger research in which lexical and grammatical functioning of English feeling words was studied (Родионова, 2015). Dostoevsky's novel and the three translations were analyzed for words denoting emotions. The analysis was based on Carroll Izard's theory of differential emotions and his list of basic emotions: interest, enjoyment, surprise, sadness, anger, disgust, contempt, fear, shame, shyness, and guilt (Izard, 1991). 77 such names were found in the Russian text. They are words denoting basic emotions as well as words whose definition contains reference to such names. The results for the three translations were 108 (E. Martin), 134 (A. Myers) and 114 (D. MacDuff). Further analysis showed that all the translators tend to name emotions in a more differentiated way than they are named in the original. They often use words in the semantic structure of which there are components giving additional characteristics to a person's emotional state, such as intensity, duration, behavior, even the cause of the emotion. They do use generic words for basic emotions, of course, but not so often as they are used in the Russian text. For example, the word "удивление" and its derivatives appear in the novel 189 times, while E. Martin uses "surprise" 117 times, A. Myers – 121 times, and D. McDuff – 125 times. Alongside with it the feeling of surprise is rendered with such words as "amazing", "astonishing", "wonder", "shock", "stun", "stupefaction". With only 5 words naming this emotion in the Russian text they are 11, 14, and 13 in the translations by E. Martin, A. Myers and D. McDuff respectively. The choice mainly depends on the context and its interpretation, as in Examples 1, 2 and 3.

Example 1:

– Удивительно, – сказал Ганя, – и даже с сознанием своего назначения, – прибавил он, смеясь насмешливо.
'Amazing', said Ganya, 'and aware of his vocation too,' he added, with a sarcastic laugh. (Myers)
'Astonishing,' said Ganya, 'And even with an awareness of his calling,' he added, laughing sarcastically. (McDuff)

A. Myers emphasizes the tinge of mock admiration (Oxford Dictionary of English, which is the source of all the definitions quoted in the paper, defines "amazing" as very surprising, especially in a way that makes you feel pleasure

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